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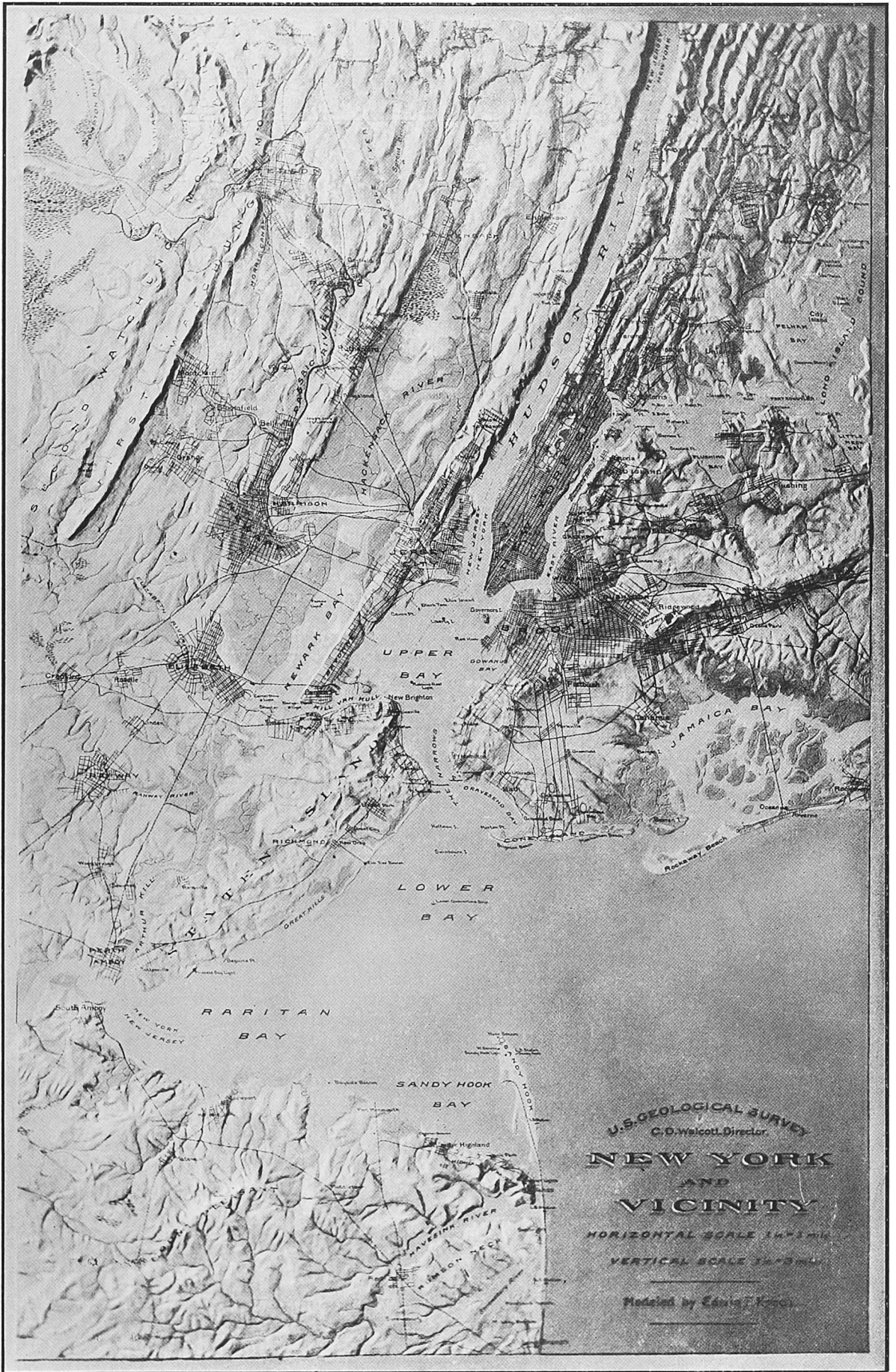
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Courtesy of Howell's Microcosm

RELIEF MAP OF NEW YORK AND VICINITY
(See opposite page)

PLANNING FOR NEW YORK'S METROPOLITAN DISTRICT

BY CHARLES C. MAY

(See opposite page)

THE date of July 25th, 1916 has been mentioned as of epochal importance in the history of New York City; it is not beyond the bounds of probability that the date of March 10th, 1917 may at some later time be regarded as of equal moment in the history of the greater metropolitan district of which Manhattan is the center. The earlier date marked the adoption by the municipal governing board of the ordinance which permits the city to regulate its property development according to use, according to height and according to area covered. The later date was marked by a small gathering in a small room at the City Club of New York where provision was made for a permanent organization to weld together for co-operative action all the local town-planning commissions of the Metropolitan area. To prove anything of more than ordinary and local interest in such a meeting and such an organization requires some word of explanation.

We have happily arrived at a point where one can reasonably assume a certain amount of familiarity with and acceptance of the city-planning idea on the part of the general public. This is proven in many ways, but in none perhaps more strikingly than by the comparative unanimity with which New York accepted the restrictive act of July 25, 1916. Ten years ago the provisions of that law would have raised a storm of protest; they would have been derided as unjust and confiscatory; as infringements upon the liberty of the individual; as contrary to the spirit of American institutions. It is even probable that the courts would have upheld the protest of the outraged citizen. As it was, during the long period of study and incubation of the 1916 provisions, the adverse criticism and objection, while at first considerable, proved free from bitterness and open to reason; indeed, among the real estate interests, where most active opposition was at first encountered, a complete reversal took place. Real estate having been consulted and made acquainted with the intent of the measure, was at the last lined up solidly in its favor—a circumstance of incomparable value in convincing the public of the good faith of the city-planners!

Intelligent as is public opinion to-day on the subject of city-planning, it is so only by comparison with other days, and its knowledge does not include a thorough understanding of the province of modern planning commissions, nor of their accomplishments here and elsewhere. It does not realize, for example, that for the nearest approach to an ideal system of interrelated urban and suburban rapid-transit we must look to Australia; that for pre-eminence in city-planning law on the Western Hemisphere we must consider Nova Scotia; that for broad attack and centralized authority on city-planning matters Canada is far and away beyond the United States.

Speaking locally again, the public has only the slightest conception of the prodigious tasks that

have been performed in collecting, analyzing and making available for use, data concerning the greater city as regards physical layout, topography, transportation, dock and harbor conditions, as well as regarding congestion, housing and all other phases of its social conditions. Nor is the need for these masses of statistics generally appreciated. It was not so long ago that conclusions as to a city's needs and recommendations for extensive changes were made from purely superficial investigation, the investigators themselves not realizing to the full the importance of complete information upon which to base a diagnosis. Now this is all changed. The city-planner must have all the data at hand before construction work can begin. Herein the city-planners have the advantage over the surgeons—it is perfectly practicable to perform the autopsy as a preliminary to a constructive operation, instead of as a post-mortem, useful only as a lesson for a later case. So the New York City-Planning Commission has been tirelessly pursuing this preliminary work of dissection until now it is in a position to apply the data and draw conclusions with almost the certitude of an exact science.

Thus far the Planning Commission of New York has been too occupied with this mass of preliminary detail to deal with more than a few specific problems of such a pressing nature as was the zoning ordinance. It has not yet been possible therefore to carry far the study of the great constructive work that lies before it, viz.: the formation of a general city plan for Greater New York. Such a layout would aim not only to correct mistakes of past generations of haphazard building, wherever difficulties are not insuperable or cost prohibitive; it would more especially furnish a plan to which new developments in the vast outlying areas of the city must conform.

Manifestly, no city and no town in this day can live unto itself alone. In innumerable ways each must admit its interdependence with the interests of the town next door, with the minor city that lies not far distant but in an adjoining county; more than that, it finds that it can not fail to take account of its relation to the State boundaries. City-planning that attempted to ignore County and State-planning would be no more intelligent than a motorist who started for a tour equipped with nothing but a map of his own city. Just as the motor has multiplied the effective radius of the individual, so the newer conception of city-planning sees its sphere of activity spreading out to limits as yet untouched.

It is in the study of this larger aspect of the commission's work that the need of cooperative action was made plain, and it was this need that led up to and found expression in calling together these hundred representatives of the thirty or forty-mile radial area about New York proper. As at present organized, there are immediately interested, beside the New York City-Planning Commission, the Westchester County-Planning Commission,

the Nassau County Association, which partakes of the nature of a planning-commission for that section of Long Island adjoining the city at the east; there are in New Jersey the commissions of the cities of Newark, and various others to the number of eighteen or more. These are already linked together by an organization for Essex County, New Jersey.

Westchester, N. Y., enjoys the distinction of being the first county to organize for city-planning. It is now the parent of a large group of village and town-planning commissions throughout the county. Left to themselves most of these village committees could scarcely attain a broader field of activity than that of a Village Improvement Society—a form of organization sometimes of the most signal usefulness to the community but often prone to go to pieces upon the rocks of the trivial or sentimental. In combination with county interests, drawing inspiration from the experience and achievements of the best town-planning thought of the country, the proposed organization has potentialities difficult to conceive and impossible to delimit. Obviously, the personnel of the directors is of prime importance. To name the men responsible for the conception of this meeting is to give assurance of a policy conservative, constructive and creative.

The afternoon meeting was called to order by Mr. Nelson P. Lewis, chief engineer for the New York Board of Estimate, whose introductory talk gave the keynote for the session. Mr. Lawson Purdy, president of New York's Department of Taxes and Assessments, spoke of the recent zoning law, restricting New York City buildings for height, use and area. The suggestion for the new organization was put before the meeting by Mr. Geo. B. Ford, city-plan consultant for the New York City Commission, whose recent reports, such as that for Newark, New Jersey, have been more than any others responsible for putting city-planning on a scientific basis. The evening session had for its presiding officer Mr. Frank Bacchus Williams, chairman of the city-plan committee of the City Club of New York, author of the text of the new zoning ordinance and eminent authority on all phases of city-planning law.

The executive action taken by the meeting consisted of the appointment of a Committee on Plan and Scope. They are to consider and report to a later meeting a program for a permanent form of organization. This committee includes Messrs. Nelson P. Lewis, Frank B. Williams of New York City, Mr. Oscar Maddaus, secretary of the Nassau County Association, Mr. Herbert Angell, secretary of the Westchester County Planning-Commission to whom is due a large measure of credit for the idea of the meeting, and Mr. Harry Meixell, Jr., of the New Jersey State Chamber of Commerce. This body expresses in its composition the principle under which it is hoped the permanent organization may work. New York City is to have a slightly more influential voice than any single one of the minor organizations yet not a majority over them; they in turn are to be individually subordinate to the greater city, yet in the aggregate powerful enough to obviate any possible tendency toward

domineering by the central unit. We have said that such a combination would have inherent capacities of far-reaching importance. What, then, are some of the ways and means by which the organization may prove its usefulness and justify its existence?

Most obvious of all, perhaps, is the need of a better coordinated system of main highways, connecting the suburban and rural areas with the urban focus. The inadequacy of the existing facilities has long been recognized. It is partly due to the extremely difficult shape of Manhattan Island as a nucleus for a radial system; yet some of the most flagrant cases of disorganization occur at present in the flat-lying districts of Brooklyn with undeveloped areas in every direction. Here in Brooklyn, for example, the beautiful Shore Drive ends nowhere, leaving the pleasure-seeker no alternative but a return over the same route. It is notoriously difficult to find one's way by motor from Brooklyn out to Nassau County, the only main arteries that seem to promise continuity ending dismally in the built-up sections of Brownsville—a maze of minor streets at once perplexing and disheartening. Incidentally there exist in several parts of the city border-line districts where the vagaries of real-estate history have made certain areas impossible of access from the city proper without passing through an adjoining county. The legal complications inherent in such a situation are worthy subjects for a five-act farce.

Not quite so obvious but of almost equal importance is the need of a well-articulated park system for the Metropolitan District. History has proven too often that American cities refuse to acquire land for park purposes until the need cries out too loudly and too insistently to be ignored. The enforced action then involves acquiring land at greatly enhanced prices or even the demolition, clearing and renovation of areas already developed. New York and her neighbor cities have now set about correcting so patently uneconomic a procedure. Boston has set a remarkable example. Her Metropolitan Park system is a model for the country—it comprises areas in all the surrounding townships, totalling 4½ per cent. of the area of the whole city; against this—or Philadelphia's even greater 6.2 per cent.—New York with its 3.8 per cent. is not even a good third.

Yet New York's metropolitan district has the nucleus of a system which if properly interrelated might rival the finest. The recently opened Bear Mountain reservation, the Palisades Park on the farther and the new Inwood Park on the nearer side of the Hudson are acquisitions of the greatest importance. The Essex County park system of New Jersey needs only further connecting parkways to make it in a real sense a part of New York's system. On Long Island important parkways are being planned to give the motorist direct and pleasant access through Nassau County to the country beyond. In Westchester County work is well under way on the new Bronx River Parkway—a magnificent conception which deserves closer attention and better understanding from the public who will in a year or two be enjoying it. Wonderful as such parks are individually—consider their possibilities if linked together into cooperation as a

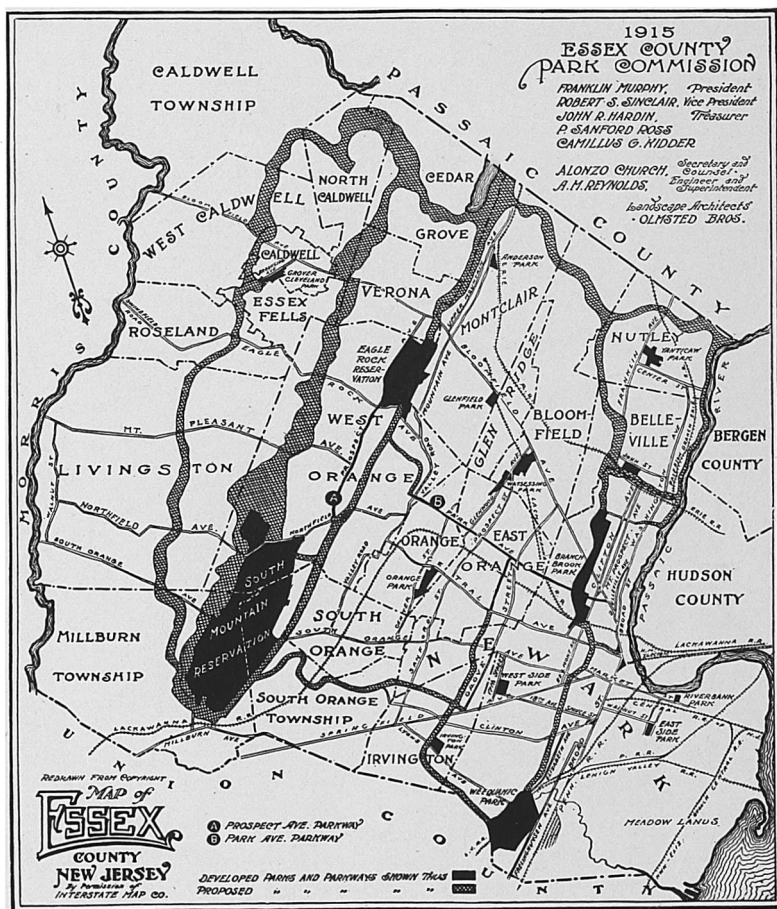
single, vast reservation for the physical well-being and the mental and spiritual recreation of the millions of this Metropolitan District!

After the past strenuous agitation in planning the great dual subway system in New York and in the midst of the present anxiety for its completion, are we not inclined to regard the city's rapid-transit layout as one thing taken care of, one item we shall not have to worry over for a long time to come? Far from being the case, the new subways will no sooner be in operation than new needs will arise and the defects in operation will become increasingly evident.

We have referred to the highly modernized trans-

system that passes for miles through undeveloped territory yet maintains a short-interval service throughout the day. Its usefulness is still, however, very seriously impaired by just this lack of coordination with the rapid-transit system of the city proper.

Such are a few of the far-reaching problems for whose solution the inner city and its surrounding cities, towns and villages are interdependent. Besides these, there are numerous aspects of town-development and town-planning from which the villages may draw inspiration, encouragement and guidance by association with the central body of city-planners. Exactly as happens in Massachu-



MAP OF ESSEX COUNTY, NEW JERSEY. OLMSTED BROTHERS, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

portation system of Sydney, far off in Australia. We can learn from their achievement in many ways—in the coordination between suburban and urban rapid transit, in the extensive development of transfer facilities for suburban lines, in the adoption of season ticket privileges on subordinate routes, similar to our railway commutation tickets, in hooking up the suburban rapid transit with the subway system of the inner city (as has been done to a certain extent in Boston) in the adoption for suburban traffic of a scientific schedule (as has been done in Liverpool) by which time-tables are rendered superfluous by a service at stated, short headway for local and at somewhat longer intervals for express trains. The nearest approach to this kind of service as yet in operation about New York is that of the Westchester and Boston Railroad, a

setts, where all the village and town-planning boards (commissions are mandatory for cities of 10,000 or more population) are correlated under the state-planning board known as the Homestead Commission, so in Westchester and the rest of the Metropolitan District of New York the first lesson the villages will learn will doubtless be—how little they actually know about themselves! Next will come a realization of the need of the civic survey as a preliminary to intelligent planning of a comprehensive sort. In this preparatory work the central body must be indispensable, its influence predominant. Later on its province may well become more one of cooperation and general helpfulness, in proportion as individual commissions acquire aggressiveness and initiative of their own.

Charles C. May